

CHAPTER 8: TELEVISION — Page 3

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NOTE: Some illustrations used here are not found in the print edition.

What about closed-captioning?

Will it help struggling readers?



Thanks to former President George Bush, all televisions sold in the U.S. since July 1993, are equipped with a computer chip allowing "closed-captioning" (subtitles) to appear at the bottom of the screen. Initially invented to make television and film accessible for the hearing-impaired, the captions reach all but the blind, and a recent federal law requires that all TV programming be captioned by 2006.

Because of its newness, research is just beginning with captioned TV but there is enough to indicate **significant gains in comprehension and vocabulary development (especially among bilingual students) when receiving instruction with educational television that was captioned.**¹¹ Since we know children easily learn to read words from pages or product labels when they see the words and simultaneously hear the parent say the words, it appears that reasonable doses of captioned television can do no harm and most likely help with reading.

Research among 9-year-olds in **Finland** appears to confirm this. These children are the highest scoring young readers in the world, but they also spend more time watching TV than reading. "However, there is a special feature in Finnish TV programs and also those of other Nordic countries," reports **Pirjo Linnakylä**, a Finnish national research coordinator. "Many programs have **subtitles**, and watching these programs seems to motivate and enhance reading among young students."

In fact, almost 50 percent of Finnish television consists of foreign TV programs and movies that must be read — and read quickly — in order to be understood. Finnish 9-year-olds want to learn to read in order to understand TV and therefore watch a moderately heavy amount. By age 14, however, the situation reverses itself and Nordic children who watch a light amount of TV outscore the heavy viewers.¹²

(UPDATE FOR THE WEB: Finnish law prohibits the teaching of reading to children before age seven, yet they manage some of the world's most remarkable reading scores. For more information, see: *The New York Times*, "Educators Flocking to Finland, Land of Literate Children," by Lizette Alvarez, April 9, 2004.)

And a final aspect of captions you might wish to consider: For children who already are competent but lazy readers and prefer watching television to reading, turn the sound off and the captioning on; this requires children to read their shows instead of just watching them. With the sound off, there are no vocabulary gains but with achieving readers, that's not your goal: It is to keep the child's mind from turning to mush and discourage TV overdosing. Reading the captions prevents mindless viewing. (For another technology tool for parents, see [Time-Scout](#) here.)